



A HIDDEN HISTORY

THE UNTOLD STORY OF JJC'S ALUMNI BELL

by Rachel Rose and Kelly Rohder

His blue chambray shirt and bib overalls dirty from a day spent in the fields, Bill Glasscock stood in his garage staring with much anticipation at his newest project.



Bill Glasscock, JJC yearbook portrait, 1937

The 1,500-pound bronze bell sat on a concrete apron before him, the plaster walls behind it tinted from the welding smoke of previous ventures. Floor-to-ceiling cubbyholes filled with arbitrary nails and bolts lined the opposite wall, near a tub filled with metal scraps and a lywheel perched on a log.

Joined by six men, Glasscock deliberated the best way to clean his latest, tarnished acquisition, his trademark red handkerchief a visible bulge in his back pocket.

On this particular spring day, the 52-year-old Joliet farmer and first president of the Joliet Junior College Board of Trustees was about to undertake a project unlike any other.

Forty years later, that bell stands—perhaps inconspicuously—on a simple, austere steel frame in a quiet, wooded nook of the JJC Main Campus between the lake and the E-Building, easily passed by as students, staff and faculty hurry to and from their destinations around campus. But behind this unassuming college landmark is an inspiring story waiting to be told: a story of one man's commit-

ment, dedication and pride in the history of JJC and the Joliet community.

As the story goes, Glasscock '37 saved the bell from destruction when he learned the former Will County Courthouse, built in 1885, was set for demolition in 1969. The bell, which had chimed on the hour from inside the courthouse clock tower for decades, held a certain nostalgia for Glasscock. To him, it represented a significant piece of Joliet and Will County history that needed to be salvaged. And there was no better place to preserve the old bell, Glasscock thought, than on JJC's newly built campus on Houbolt Road.

After negotiations with the company responsible for the demolition, he purchased the bell for \$1,500 (his own money) from the company and tucked it safely away in the garage of his farmhouse.

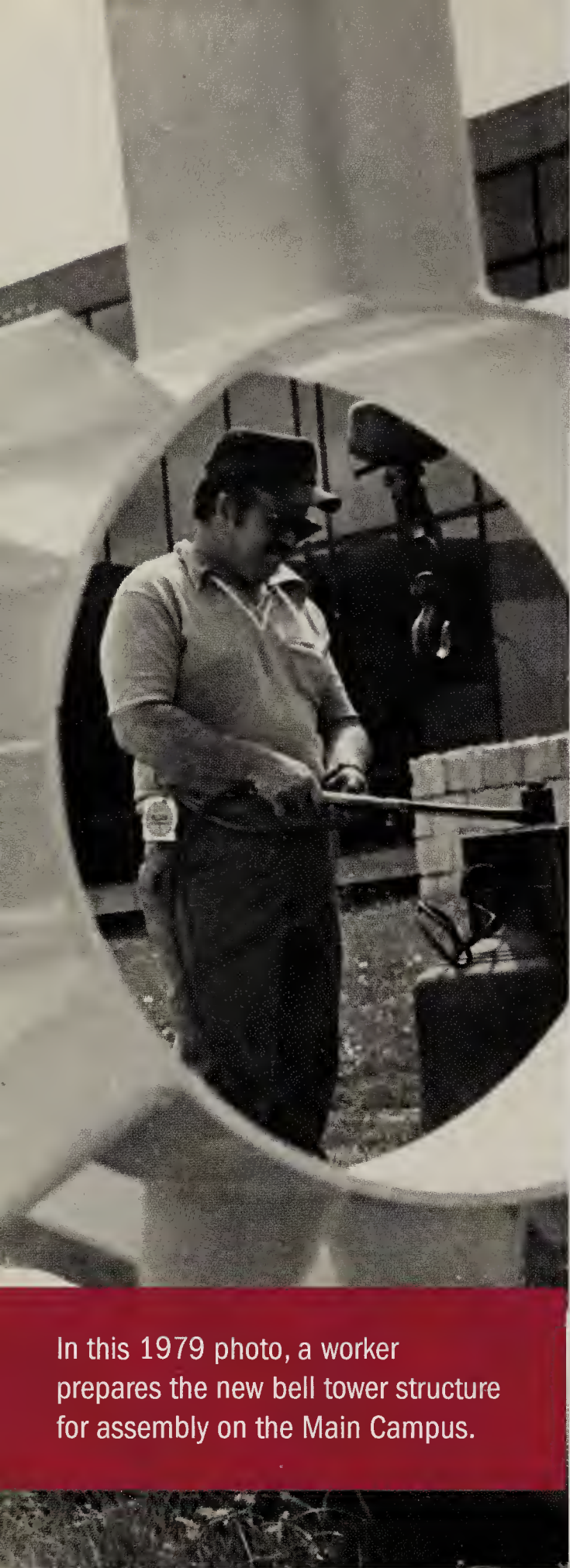
Glasscock's daughter, Gayle Crompton '64, recalled the mix of humor and aggravation that marked that day for the men gathered in the Glasscock family garage.

"[They] used their total sum of knowledge to work all afternoon to get the bell to shine," Crompton, who was in her early 20s at the time, said. "First they used soap and water, dish soap and water, laundry soap and water, and a lot of elbow grease to remove the filth of many years in the tower at the courthouse.

"They then started with the chemicals to brighten and shine the bell. It worked pretty well, and the bell began to shine. Finally, they were satisfied that they had done all they could to improve the bell enough to have a place of honor on the campus. They all stood around in awe with smiles on their faces. 'Well, I guess that is that. We can rinse it off now,' someone said. There was a pail of water filled and splashed over the bell. It immediately turned back to the original dark color!"

Ron Whitaker, who was elected with Glasscock to the college's first board in 1967, was also there that day.

"We were all so enthused about it," Whitaker said. "I can remember looking closely at it, reading the inscription... I



In this 1979 photo, a worker prepares the new bell tower structure for assembly on the Main Campus.

just thought it was so neat to get it for the new college.”

The inscription, which simply reads “Founders Meneely Kimberly, Troy, New York, 1872” hasn’t shed much light on the bell’s past, other than the year and place where it was forged.

For those close to Glasscock, his resolve to save the bell wasn’t surprising.

“Bill was quite a guy,” Dr. Cecil Ingmire, a former college trustee and friend of Glasscock’s said. “He would get something started and see it through. He was very determined in everything he did.”

Glasscock, who passed away in 1999 at the age of 82, also left an indelible impression on Henry Pillard, his colleague and college administrator from 1965 to 1988.

“He walked into a room and you noticed him. He was regal,” Pillard said. “He would have been a leader in whatever he chose to do. That was Bill... A natural-born and respected leader.”

Pillard pointed to Glasscock’s service in the Army Air Corps during World War II, adding that it revealed a lot about his character. After Glasscock graduated from JJC in 1937, he spent several years working as a flight instructor out of Roscoe Turner Airfield in Indianapolis. His primary duty, though, was to lead squadrons of airplanes—many times through inclement weather and rough terrain—to Alaska for ultimate transport to Russia.

“It’s significant that they chose him to do that job,” Pillard said. “That says a lot about what they thought of him.”

He later returned to Joliet to run the family farm and raise three children with his wife, Elasteen. Throughout the years, Glasscock’s loyalty to JJC and the Joliet community remained a constant; when District 525 was first formed in 1967, he was there to serve in a leadership role. He was elected to the first Board of Trustees in April of the same year, and was later named the first president of the board.

“Bill’s personality was that of a typical farmer – honest, very friendly to everyone and straightforward,” said Jay Bergman, former director of the JJC Alumni Association and current member of the Illinois Board of Higher Education. “I have found very few people with the passion for their respective institutions that Bill Glasscock had for Joliet Junior College.”

During the late ‘60s, formative years for the college, Glasscock stood out as a strong and committed leader. The transition from the high school to the new campus on Houbolt Road was a difficult one at times, and while Glasscock wanted to ensure that traditions were preserved, he also wanted the new college to establish its own identity. This, in part, is what compelled him to acquire the bell.

“At Joliet Township High School where JJC was first located, there was always a bell to signal the changing of classes,”

Alumni Bell Timeline

- **1969:** Bill Glasscock acquires the bell from Foschi Brothers, the company that demolished the Will County Courthouse.
- **April 1969:** The bell was used in the A.R. McAllister Band’s performance of the 1812 Overture at the Rialto Theatre.
- **August 1969:** Verdin Company picks up the bell in Joliet, takes it to Cincinnati for cleaning, new hardware and apparatus for mounting.
- **December 1969:** Bell was returned to the Glasscock home, then brought to the JJC Main Campus and mounted on the temporary tower.
- **1970s:** The Alumni Association launched a campaign to raise funds for building a permanent bell tower.
- **August 1979:** The bell tower is assembled and painted.
- **October 10, 1979:** An official dedication ceremony for the new tower was held.
- **June 2009:** The bell is incorporated into the college’s new logo.

All photos courtesy of the JJC archives.



Joyce Heap, Bill Glasscock and Robert Kiep at the dedication ceremony in 1979.

Crompton said. “So, there simply needed to be a bell at the new campus. But not just any bell—my father wanted a big bell with character.”

Besides Glasscock and the other college administrators who supported his acquisi-

tion of the bell, members of the Joliet community were also behind his efforts to salvage the courthouse icon.

“There was a lot of local support for bringing the bell to JJC,” said Tom Mahalik ’69, a student at the time the bell was brought to JJC. “It was an emotional time for the community because the Will County Courthouse was a cherished historical piece of Joliet that was lost when it was demolished, and bringing the courthouse’s bell to JJC was a way of preserving a piece of that history.”

It took a few years to raise sufficient funds to build the new tower, while construction was slowed by a campus-wide debate over the structural integrity and safety of the tower. Once a satisfactory design was created and approved by the Board of Trustees, the tower was assembled and officially dedicated on October 10, 1979.

It was a time of celebration, not only to commemorate the end of a years-long process, but also to acknowledge the fact that the bell finally had a permanent home.

“There simply needed to be a bell at the new campus. But not just any bell—my father wanted a big bell with character.” – Gayle Crompton, ’64

In December of 1969, the bell was mounted on top of a temporary tower made of telephone poles, and rang every 10 minutes to the hour and on the hour. It stood in the quad of the interim campus—a central location for students to gather between classes, hold pep rallies and even stage anti-war demonstrations. One October 1970 edition of the student-run newspaper, *The Blazer*, referenced the bell as a “bulwark of tradition.”

Chris Dragatsis ’50, met Glasscock when he joined the JJC Alumni Association Board, and later succeeded him as president of the Alumni Association Board in 1978. Dragatsis took part in the efforts to create a permanent home for the bell, and even personally paid the architecture firm that designed the new structure to house it.

Today, the bell’s relevance at JJC is no less significant. In 2009, the college established its first logo, in which the bell is featured prominently.

“The discovery of the history of the college’s bell has been a pleasant awakening to the depth of richness that exists on the Main Campus,” said Dr. Gena Proulx, JJC president. “Few community colleges can tie their roots to something of this degree of significance to both alumni and the community. We have something that our employees, students and alumni can embrace. Now, the bell and its use in the new college logo pave the way for us to tie tradition to the future. What a wonderful thing to celebrate!”

